

Contribution to a discussion on a draft paper for a principles of pastoral care for soldiers in joint European Armed Forces and during International Missions

For more than 50 years leading military chaplains of the air forces in the area of the NATO have met for annual conferences to exchange information.

Since 1990, after the fall of the “Iron Curtain”, leading military chaplains from nearly all European, North American and some Asian countries have had annual meetings on the initiative of the US-military chaplaincy to exchange information, discuss problems and to learn better know each other.

For more than 20 years took place meetings between leading Catholic chaplains from Belgium, Germany, Luxemburg and the Netherlands twice a year. These meetings help to notice the development in the individual countries and, if possible, to solve joint problems and to start coordinating work, especially during foreign missions.

These meetings were characterized by the exchange of information and discussions. It is nearly impossible to coordinate the joint work by the military chaplains of the individual countries, in the fields where the joint missions bring them together in foreign missions. The reason is given by each individual country’s organizational sovereignty of the military chaplaincies.

A so called united NATO-pastoral care, which seemed an obvious option when it came to this organisation’s enlargement and which then might have been established by the HQ SHAPE/B under American leadership, was not wished, although it had been suggested.

That such a solution would have had its advantages for the individual military chaplains, at least on the organizational level, was considered. The characteristics and national identities must also be taken into consideration; even more so referring to the understanding of expectations of pastoral care and religious ideas as well regarding the diversity of religious and confessional beliefs.

On the part of us as Catholics, there is another point to be considered; in the last consequence the military chaplaincy is not led by the government but by Military Bishops and/or on behalf of the delegate of the national Bishop’s Conference and under its jurisdiction.

Facing the difficult implications of such an intention on the one hand and the yet increasingly more urgent establishment of joint general rules for international and multinational armed forces organisations on the other hand, we should ask as Catholic military chaplaincy:

Is it possible that Military Chaplaincies of these countries which cooperate as Church, – regarding obvious future developments and an increasing number of joint missions – to develop general considerations for joint rules for a better planning and more effective performance of the work of Catholic military chaplains would be facilitated and at the same time the responsibility of the individual military ordinaries maintained.

All considerations should be arranged with the Bishop's Congregation in the Vatican and especially with the established office for coordination of pastoral care in the armed forces.

The advantage would not only be given in the fact that we all have a common base and the rules would stay on the basis of a joint authority. The Vatican would be closer related to the work of the military chaplains of all countries. The work and also the support of the central office for the coordination of pastoral care in the armed forces at the Bishop's Congregation in the Vatican could be intensified.

1. Pre-considerations

The integration of the armed forces of European countries in a joint European force and the joint International Missions have brought the responsible leaders of the individual national military chaplaincies to consider how they could accomplish their task and do their services in this field competently and adequately.

It is to be considered, however, that the military chaplaincy generally is taken responsibility for and organised on a national level. Nationally established rights and legal bases of the military chaplaincy will be maintained for the soldiers of the each nation.

They have to be realised in relation to the interests and in consideration of the joint mission and in cooperation with the military leaders of the different nations in the international context.

So some basic keystones have to be named to

- maintain the rights of the soldiers of different countries
- secure the work of the individual national military chaplains on the basis of the different national legal situation
- settle the responsibilities of the military chaplains in more respects than for the respective national area.

For reaching this aim, the political and military leadership of the individual countries are called for as well as the ecclesiastical leaders of the individual national military chaplaincies, to make legally valid agreements which governs

- the responsibilities and relation to the respective commanders of the joint European force /joint international missions
- the amount and form of the pastoral care offered
- as well as guarantee the possibilities of the soldiers of all nations to have access to these offers.

2. Basic considerations.

It is to be reviewed, if all soldiers of our countries serving in the framework of the joint European force /joint International Missions have a legal right for religious activities and therefore can claim pastoral care in their respective armed forces.

The pastoral care is generally guaranteed by the military chaplains of different countries that are part of the joint European force /joint international missions.

During the time of their joint service in the joint European force /joint International Missions, the military chaplains have the right to offer their pastoral service not only to their own soldiers but also to soldiers of other nations.

The Church's leading organs in the military chaplaincies of the countries in question give the military chaplain of the respective other nations the ecclesiastical order and if necessary the according jurisdiction for ecclesiastical activities for the military chaplains of other nations while serving in the joint European force /joint International Missions (see Draft for exchange of jurisdiction).

The ecclesiastical leadership exchanges information about names, places of missions and duration of services in the joint European force /joint international missions.

It is to be considered whether the central office for the coordination of the pastoral care at the Bishop's Congregation is to be informed.

At the same time, the responsible military leaders / commanders of the joint European force are informed about the mission of their military chaplains by the individual ecclesiastical leaderships.

The military chaplains of the joint European force are obliged to inform the ecclesiastical leadership of countries concerned about official activities on soldiers of other nations as far as they are requiring certification (register of baptisms, marriages, confirmation,)

The political leadership and the military commanders of the nations participating in joint European force recognize the order of the ecclesiastical authorities and support the work of the military chaplains for the soldiers of different nations.

The military chaplains are coordinated to the respective military seniors, notwithstanding the different nationalities. They have the right to take part in meetings of the staff and may approach the respective commander directly.

The commanders support the work of the military chaplains by providing rooms for office, transportation facilities and, if needed, soldiers as Chaplains assistants.

The commanders are responsible for the safekeeping of the military chaplaincies' personnel; above all during foreign missions.

As far as official concerns do not render it necessary, the national characters of the individual nation's military chaplaincies are to be considered.

The military chaplains in the joint European force coordinate their work in regular official meetings. They exchange information; above all in case they give pastoral care to soldiers of an other nationality. They have regular contact to the commanders. They care and make sure that in individual cases the wish of the soldiers for a military chaplain of their own country and confession is fulfilled.

3. Future steps to realisation

The leading military chaplains review on national level the ideas contained in this draft for usability, acceptability and appropriateness. They supplement and correct according to the interests and situation of their own country. They contact other branches of their national military chaplaincy (Protestants, Jews, etc.) and if necessary seek an agreement. At least they inform them.

The drafts which had been worked on by the leading military chaplains of each country will be harmonized in a joint meeting; if this does not turn out possible in some points, additional agreements for the individual countries will be added.

If a joint document is accepted by all nations concerned, this will be presented to the individual ecclesiastical leadership on national level.
(Military Bishops)

Before the joint document concerning the national military chaplaincy can come into force, the joint document is presented to and is to be accepted by the central office for the coordination of pastoral care at the Vatican.

Then the Military Bishops of the individual nations get into touch with the respective nation's political leadership of their armed forces.

Is this task accomplished, the political leadership of the respective nation informs the military commanders of the nation about their decision and orders the implementation of the agreement in the military area of the joint European force /joint International Missions.

4. Prospects.

It is suggested, that in the time before a joint agreement is reached, realisable ways and procedures of communication for military chaplains are discussed and realised as far as the joint International Missions are concerned.

A regular exchange of jurisdiction between Military Bishops, who send military chaplains on International Missions, should come into existence in order to establish a first structural approach for future co-operations between Catholic military chaplaincies of different countries.